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Sacrifice and Society

At a time when everybody seems to be pushing for more social 'space,' self-sacrifice is not much in fashion. But if people can't relearn how to subordinate their individual interests to the common good, it could spell disaster for us all ...

Have you ever stopped to think about where the human race would be if nobody ever made sacrifices? Or, more to the point, where *you* would be if nobody ever made sacrifices for you? If there were ever a formula for rendering life "nasty, brutish and short," it would be for everybody to refuse to give up anything for anybody. Yet there are disturbing signs that, in western society today, the spirit of self-sacrifice is coming to be regarded as a dispensible remnant of a less rational age.

Granted, the original concept of sacrifice was not distinguished for its rationality. It involved pleasing a lot of temperamental deities who would not deliver on their bargains if they happened to be in a bad mood. As for sacrifice being dispensible, modern people are justifiably content to do without the throwing of maidens into volcanoes or the stabbing of lambs on stone altars. But there is a deep difference between that kind of sacrifice and the kind we normally think of when we use the word today.

Primitive sacrifice was essentially based on self-interest. The people making the offerings — which often cost them little or nothing anyway — reckoned that a little divine palm-greasing might save them from the wrath of the gods and fortify their future well-being.

In contrast, the contemporary notion of sacrifice is not to give up something to help oneself, but to give up something to help others. The two concepts are as far apart as barbarism and civilization. Civilized society could not exist if citizens did not agree to sacrifice something for the common good, without expecting any direct return.

The definitive self-sacrifice in western culture is, of course, that of Christ on the cross, suffering for humanity. Christ's teachings have been grotesquely

distorted to serve selfish motives ever since. But in its pure form, Christian philosophy promotes a selfless sense of community. A clergyman as well as a novelist, Charles Kingsley once summarized the basic rules of his religion: "to give, not take; to serve, not rule; to nourish, not devour; to help, not crush; if need, to die, not live."

This is not to suggest that Christians are the only ones to teach self-denial. In many parts of the world, the "savages" Christian missionaries set out to convert could have taught them a thing or two about self-sacrifice. It was a unanimously-accepted tradition in some so-called primitive societies that certain classes of people would literally sacrifice themselves for those around them. In times of poor hunting, for instance, old Inuit men and women would stay behind on the trail to die so that the rest of the family might have enough food to survive.

A similar understanding has prevailed in time of war throughout the ages. Warriors have always gone out to die so that others of their group might survive and perpetuate their common cause. In keeping with its status as the least rational of human pursuits, war reverses the logical pattern of those who are closer to death sacrificing their lives for those who are farther away from it. In 20th-century warfare, at least, most battle casualties have been pathetically youthful. The poet A. E. Housman probed the depth of their sacrifice when he wrote: "Death, to be sure, is nothing much to lose,/ But young men think it is, and we were young."

Housman came from Britain, a country which has made massive sacrifices in this century to preserve freedom not only for itself, but for other nations. He served in World War I, in which temporary soldiers fresh from civilian life lived in filth and terror in the

trenches, and were herded out like cattle by callous and incompetent generals to die or be wounded in no man's land.

It was unbelievably horrible; still, a recognition of horrors of war should not detract from the legitimacy of the sacrifices made in it. The men who fought on the Allied side believed that they were risking death or disablement to save the people of Western Europe from a vicious tyranny. In his 1981 book *My Grandfather's War*, William D. Mathieson tells of a Canadian veteran of the trenches walking down a street in his home town with one sleeve empty. A passerby stopped to commiserate with him for the loss of his arm. "I didn't lose it, I gave it," the veteran said.

In World War II the British people were again called upon to deprive themselves and to suffer and

A willingness to 'give over' helped Britons through their worst crisis

die in what was nothing less than a fight to save civilization. If in the beginning they were ill-equipped to do so militarily, they were well-equipped psychologically by virtue of their

national tradition of civility.

The British, of course, are famous for their self-restraint. They will automatically line up in situations where people of other nationalities would mill around and push and shove to be first through an entrance. Their willingness to stand aside for others proved an iron core of strength during the most desperate crisis in their long and eventful history.

Where another country's army might have disintegrated in panic and chaos when forced onto a beach with its back to the sea at Dunkirk in 1940, the British formed queues to carry out the most famous and successful military evacuation in history. In the ensuing "blitz," their penchant for order sustained them in their resolve to fight on when they stood alone against the might of the German war machine, supported only by relatively small allied forces, primarily from Canada.

Ordinary Britons coolly refused to give in to the terror and despair which the German bombing of their homeland was intended to engender. In the bomb shelters of the London Underground, good manners and good humour combined to see them through what their leader, Winston Churchill, called "their finest hour."

More than one writer has speculated on how the British would respond to those events if they occurred today, after the "me generation" has wrought its changes on the public psychology of their country as

well as North America. The likelihood is that the British genius for courtesy would come to the fore to see them through another such ordeal.

After all, they still show a willingness to "give over." If a chap in a pub is harping on a subject, his mate will say, "Come on, Bert, give over!" Your average Bert will then turn his attention to his beer and yield the conversation to another speaker, suppressing his own desire to talk on.

Unfortunately, the expression does not seem to have an equivalent in the current North American English vocabulary — or if it has, it is certainly not translated into practice. A far more typical saying in late 20th-century North America might be, "Excuse me, but you're in my space!" Everyone, it seems, is either fiercely defending his or her "space," or pushing to expand it. The term essentially means the extent of a person's "rights," power and privileges in the society.

If the television news is any guide, the struggle for space goes on ceaselessly. Night after night TV-viewers are exposed to an endless parade of demonstrators protesting this, demanding that, crying victimization, and/or accusing somebody of having violated their rights. They all insist that their particular grievance is such a burning question of justice that it must be dealt with before any others. The trouble is that, in the clamour of voices shouting "me first," really grave injustices are likely to lose their rightful political priority.

The cacophony of special pleading has resulted in political fragmentation. Some of the grievances expressed seem rather trivial on the scale of the

Is the public mentality frozen in permanent immaturity?

problems facing other Canadians, let alone people elsewhere. Still, political attention is frequently turned to the latest source of clamour rather than to policies designed for the long-

term good of the whole nation. The natural tendency of elected politicians to act out of expediency rather than principle is strengthened by a perceived need to respond to strident public demands.

In words of Robert Hughes in *Time* magazine, there has arisen "a juvenile culture of complaint in which Big Daddy is always to blame and the expansion of rights goes on without the other half of citizenship: attachment to duties and obligations." The word "juvenile" is apt: In Canada as well as the United States, the public mood often seems to reflect an arrested maturity.

A juvenile mind will focus on one all-consuming

question at a time to the exclusion of any other consideration — as, indeed, do the single-issue politics which now loom so large in our public discourse. Juveniles typically are determined to get their way regardless of the impact on others or even the impact on their own future. In Canada and elsewhere, we can see this immature approach being taken to some of the most serious issues of our times.

The great authority on the psychological stages of life, Erik Erikson, wrote that to reach full adulthood, a person must pass through the immature stage of “self-absorption” to the stage of “generativity.” In the latter, one is concerned with what has been generated to date in his or her life, with the emphasis on parenthood. This care for the generations has a strong spiritual element to it. “It is ‘not of this world,’ and instead of competition for the world’s goods ... it seeks human brotherhood in self-denial,” Erikson explained.

Whatever their age, some individuals never pass out of self-absorption into the stage of generativity. What evidently worries many thoughtful people today is the possibility that this permanent immaturity is creeping from the individual level into the overall society.

For instance, the recent report of the Alberta Premier’s Council on the Family said that “the rise in

The Japanese worry that children will think too much of themselves, too little of the group

materialism is viewed by many as a primary cause of family instability.” In Erikson’s terms, this could be taken to mean that a growing number of people are not progressing into genera-

tivity; that they are too self-absorbed to make the sacrifices needed to build stable families. The report, based on submissions from 3,000 Alberta citizens, deplored the tendency to equate possessions with happiness — a classically immature mistake.

Whether or not more people really are becoming frozen in permanent juvenility, the social atmosphere seems perilously conducive to it. For example, there could be no better way to spoil a teenager who is convinced that the world was especially made for him than to keep asking him if everything is to his liking, and if not, how he would like it changed. Yet that is exactly what opinion polls do on a collective scale.

Also, it is difficult to convince people that they should not always think of themselves first when advertising is constantly telling them how special they are. Whatever the case in real life, in television commercials you are always “Number One.”

If advertising thus appears to encourage egocentricity, so does the self-esteem movement. The laud-

able aim of schools, churches and community groups in cultivating self-esteem is to make socially-disadvantaged people feel that they are as good as anybody else. The idea is that individuals who value themselves more will act less self-destructively. Self-esteem programs have had some success in dealing with social problems such as street crime, teenage promiscuity, and drug and alcohol abuse.

The task for those in charge of instilling it is to make sure that self-esteem is not gratuitously self-granted. Much of what is done in the field concerns recognition of achievement among people who need to be reassured of their worth. But it is temptingly easy to put the recognition before the achievement. In the United States, where one school has a program called “Very Important Kids” for children three to six years old, critics have pointed out that such stroking might make children over-confident.

In recent international tests of mathematical skills, American grade school pupils ranked far above Oriental children in their assessment of their own abilities, but far below in actual performance. (Canadian children did only slightly better, incidentally.) Commenting on the difference between child-rearing customs in the two cultures, a psychologist pointed out that Japanese parents do not heap praise on their children in case they start thinking too much of themselves and too little of the group.

At least some exponents of self-esteem have concluded that people only feel badly about themselves because they have not lived up to their full potential. One American church has gone so far as to proclaim that the greatest sin of all is not living up to your potential: from that, presumably, all other sins flow.

The proposition is fraught with potential misunderstanding. If the definition of personal fulfilment includes a regard for others and the possibility of individual sacrifice for the good of the community, then it could be a civic virtue. On the other hand, people might conclude that, if living up to your full potential is the be-all and end-all of life, then you must not allow others to get in the way.

It might be argued that a man like Paul Gauguin launched himself on the road to reaching his full potential when he threw over his career as a stockbroker to take up painting. No doubt he became a very great artist, but at what price to the wife and five children he left behind?

There are times when most people with families would like to break free of their responsibilities — and perhaps, like Gauguin, vanish in the mists of the South Sea islands. How nice it would be never to have to make sacrifices for others; to have everyone else make sacrifices for you. But for every latter-day



Gauguin responding to the stirrings of "divine discontent," there must be thousands of frustrated geniuses in various fields who have stayed where they are out of a sense of duty. Having reached the adult stage of generativity, they have decided that it is more important to fulfil their obligations to their families and communities than to attempt to fulfil themselves.

But what is self-fulfilment anyway? The wisdom of the ages states that it is not to be confused with the illusory glow of temporary self-satisfaction. Instead, the famous inscription at the Delphic Oracle summed it up in two words: "Know thyself." And how do you get to know yourself? According to the American theologian O. D. Gifford, the only way is through self-denial. Certainly you will never know what constitutes genuine satisfaction until you have given up some personal pleasure or advantage in order to do good.

"He who never sacrificed a present to a future good, or a personal to a general one, can speak of happiness only as the blind do of colours," Horace Mann wrote. This quotation has appeared on these pages before, but it bears repeating because we are all in our own ways seeking our own version of happiness. And if it is true that, to achieve happiness, "all you really need is love," then self-sacrifice is imperative. For it is clear that, without self-sacrifice, there can be no reciprocal love.

*Too selfish
for obligations,
too selfish for
reciprocal love*

Certainly it is impossible to imagine a happy marriage without the little sacrifices made by both parties day by day, to say nothing of the sacrifices parents make for their children to try to secure the happiness of the next generation. In his novel *How Sleep the Brave*, H. E. Bates examined the anatomy of an unhappy marriage through the meditations of a World War II airman stranded on a life raft and facing death:

"We had really been attracted by a mutual selfishness. And then we got to hate each other because the selfishness of one threatened the selfishness of the other. A selfishness that surrenders is unselfishness. Neither of us would surrender. We were too selfish to have children; we were too selfish to trouble about

obligations. Finally, we were too selfish to want each other."

That willingness to "surrender" one's selfish aims is vital not only to the family, but to society in general. By refusing to contribute to the good of the whole, we perversely contribute to our own downfall.

A Somalian saying traces the spiral of hostility that comes from an over-concentration on oneself: "I and Somalia against the world. I and my clan against Somalia. I and my family against the clan. I and my brother against the family. I against my brother." Somalia lately has been suffering through an appallingly brutal civil war.

History is full of object lessons as to what happens when people refuse to recognize the need for self-sacrifice. Until well into this century, for example, Argentina was one of the richest nations in the world. But there came a time when none of the competing interests in its economy — the landed gentry, the labour movement, the bourgeoisie, the financiers — was willing to make the sacrifices needed to keep it growing. Eventually the economy collapsed under the weight of all their demands on it.

The refusal of the various Argentine factions to subordinate their interests to the common good not only wrecked the country's economy, but caused terrible social misery. At its lowest ebb, Argentina alternated between violent anarchy and brutal dictatorship. Its history makes an extreme example of what happens when particularism — the public manifestation of "every man for himself" — becomes the dominant force in politics. It shows that selfishness can be so strong that "it will break a world to pieces, to make a stool to sit on," as the old English preacher Richard Cecil wrote.

— Break a world to pieces? At the very end of the day, after everybody has pleaded that he was only exercising his own God-given rights, that is just what an excess of selfishness could be instrumental in doing. The underlying message from the recent Earth Summit in Brazil was that the nations of this earth simply cannot continue polluting its atmosphere, land and water as they have up to now. Genuine, substantive and massive sacrifices will have to be made to put the world on the path of sustainable development. In the long run, a willingness to make sacrifices may be all that stands between the human race and catastrophe. Selfishness or survival — which is it to be?

